

America Made the Pet a Mass Market

Suburbia, television, supermarkets and the commercialisation of love

Britain supplied an early cultural and commercial template. The United States gave that template unprecedented scale.

Across the twentieth century, urbanisation and suburbia brought more animals inside the household; mass retail made specialised food continuously available; radio and television carried the same emotional propositions into millions of homes; market research divided owners into exploitable psychological types; and veterinary medicine became a channel through which commercial claims could acquire professional authority.

The result was not merely a large pet-food market. It was a cultural operating system: acquire a companion, regard it as family, buy a formula as the ordinary expression of care, consult the clinic when illness appears, and understand the resulting burdens as the normal cost of responsible ownership.

This history does not show that affection for animals is false. It shows how genuine affection can be made commercially productive—and how the language of love can disable scrutiny of the material practice carried out in love's name.

1. From leftovers to a recurring grocery purchase

Commercial pet food existed in the United States by the late nineteenth century, but the decisive expansion came with industrial production, national distribution and the modern grocery system. A variable household practice—feeding scraps, bones and locally available animal materials—was converted into a branded, repeatable purchase.

The manufacturer gained three advantages. First, the animal had to eat every day. Second, the purchaser could be told that the biological problem was too technical for ordinary judgment. Third, failure could be attributed to the animal's age, breed, genes, lack of exercise or the owner's imperfect compliance rather than to the default feeding model.

The package therefore sold more than calories. It sold relief from uncertainty. "Complete and balanced" promised that the difficult work of understanding an animal had already been performed elsewhere by experts. The owner's moral task was reduced to brand selection and regular purchase.

Tom Lonsdale later described the perceptual effect of the aisle itself: “With endless, regular use the concepts stick” (*Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud*, 2023, p. 6). The product category becomes reality by repetition. What sits under the sign “pet food” is assumed to be what pets should eat.

2. Suburbia enlarged the household market

Post-war suburban growth provided an ideal physical setting for mass pet ownership: detached houses, yards, children, automobiles and large supermarkets. The family dog could be represented as playmate, guardian, status object and emotional glue. The cat could become an indoor companion whose feeding and toileting needs were serviced by purchased products.

This was a commercial multiplier. Every new pet household created demand not only for food but for bowls, leads, toys, litter, grooming, medicines, insurance, training, veterinary services and replacement animals over successive generations. A pet industry could grow by increasing the number of pets, increasing the proportion fed prepared food, increasing the price and differentiation of that food, and increasing the range of services considered responsible care.

None of this required consumers to be foolish. It required the system to make one route easy, visible and respectable while making alternatives appear inconvenient, primitive or dangerous.

3. Television industrialised intimacy

Television placed the commercial message inside the family room. The strongest advertisements did not dwell on ingredients or comparative disease outcomes. They staged relationships: the loyal dog, the happy child, the grateful cat, the competent mother and the benevolent expert. The product sat between human affection and animal response as if it caused the bond it merely monetised.

A 1976 *New Yorker* investigation of pet-food advertising documented the sophistication of the industry. It reported large advertising expenditure, close attention to households with school-age children, and marketing categories that treated animals as surrogate children, love objects and targets of anthropomorphism. Those terms are important because they show that the emotional mechanism was not merely guessed at by later critics. It was part of the commercial analysis of the period.

The ethical problem is not that an advertisement evokes affection. It is that affection can crowd out the question of biological consequence. The viewer is invited to judge the feeding act by the warmth of the scene rather than by the condition of teeth, gums, metabolism and organs over a lifetime.

4. The child was both audience and infrastructure

Children influenced household purchases and carried habits into adulthood. Jingles, mascots, puppies, kittens and promises of friendship made pet consumption memorable before a child could evaluate a health claim. The lesson was repeated at home: food for a dog or cat came from a can, packet or box with an animal pictured on it.

The commercial value of childhood lies in duration. A campaign can obtain an immediate request at the supermarket, influence the parent's purchase, and establish the default behaviour of a future adult. Lonsdale's earlier analysis put the mechanism starkly: "Children grow up and become parents" (*Raw Meaty Bones*, 2001/2023, p. 251).

This is the point at which the comparison with Meta and other attention platforms becomes useful—if kept precise. Both systems can reach children repeatedly, convert social identity into commercial behaviour and make the product environment appear natural. Both can benefit when the user supplies future users: a child becomes an adult account holder; a child taught the pet-consumption script becomes a pet-owning parent.

The analogy has limits. Pet-food advertising is not a personalised social network, and historical campaigns did not possess today's real-time behavioural data. The comparison should therefore illuminate the business logic of habituation and intergenerational capture, not imply technological identity.

5. Professional authority became a sales asset

The supermarket message was powerful; a veterinary message was more powerful still. A clinician could reassure an anxious owner at the moment of maximum trust. Manufacturers supplied literature, samples, education and claims framed as nutritional science. The clinic could become both a place of treatment and a point of product validation.

The public record contains a revealing United States example. In *Alpo Petfoods v. Ralston Purina*, a federal court examined a multimillion-dollar Puppy Chow campaign claiming benefits in relation to canine hip dysplasia. Promotional materials went to veterinarians, breeders and consumers. The case does not prove that every veterinary marketing claim is false. It does demonstrate the commercial value of disease-related claims and professional channels—and the capacity of such claims to create an impression of prevention or treatment.

Where a company markets a daily exposure through health professionals, the evidentiary obligation should be exceptionally high. The relevant test is not whether the formula meets a compositional

standard over a short period. It is whether animals fed in the promoted manner across a lifetime fare better or worse than animals fed materially different diets, including in oral health, chronic inflammation, behaviour, quality of life and need for intervention.

6. “Pet parent” completed the moral lock

In recent decades American culture has moved from the pet as family entertainment toward the pet as a bona fide family member. Sociological research records people describing animals as children, siblings and full participants in family identity. This recognition can improve care and increase sensitivity to suffering. It also gives the market a powerful moral vocabulary.

Once “pet parent” becomes an identity, product choice becomes a test of parental virtue. Premiumisation follows naturally: higher-priced foods, therapeutic formulas, subscriptions, diagnostics and wellness plans can be sold not simply as purchases but as proof of love.

Yet the metaphor contains a dangerous inversion. A human parent is expected to question an arrangement that repeatedly makes a child ill. The pet parent is often trained to interpret chronic disease as an unfortunate but ordinary feature of the animal, then to purchase further products and services from the same commercial-professional ecosystem. The language of parenthood intensifies responsibility while narrowing the information available for exercising it.

7. Disease can disappear into normality

The most consequential achievement of mass conditioning is the normalisation of outcomes. Foul breath, inflamed gums, dental procedures, obesity, itching, bowel disturbance and chronic medication can be treated as routine features of modern pet life. Each case is individualised. The population pattern is rarely placed beside the default feeding pattern and tested as a system.

This is where the moral harm exceeds trickery at the point of sale. If chronic pain and disease are foreseeable consequences of a promoted practice, then making those consequences appear normal perpetuates the injury. It also converts failure into new demand: special diets, dental products, consultations, tests and procedures.

The claim requires disciplined testing. Not every disease is diet-caused; not every processed product has the same composition or effect; and individual animals differ. But those qualifications do not justify the absence of transparent, long-duration, independently designed comparisons. Uncertainty is a reason to investigate, not a licence to reassure indefinitely.

8. The pound and shelter absorbed the overflow

American animal control developed through the pound model: unhoused or surplus animals were captured, confined and often killed in the interests of public order. Later sheltering and rescue movements increasingly emphasised welfare, adoption and live release. They have achieved substantial reductions in killing in many communities and perform difficult work under resource constraints.

But the upstream system continues to produce relinquishment. Peer-reviewed research describes abandonment and overpopulation as persistent systemic problems with welfare, public-health, ecological and economic costs. Behaviour, housing, cost and owner circumstances recur as surrender factors. Shelters must either limit intake, maintain animals in confinement, transfer them, find homes or euthanise them.

Brand-funded adoption campaigns can relieve real suffering. They can also perform a market function. Mars established the PEDIGREE Foundation in 2008 to support shelter and rescue organisations and increase adoption. Each successful adoption is a moral good for the individual dog. Structurally, it is also the creation or renewal of a dog-owning household and years of category consumption.

This is not an accusation against adopters or shelter staff. It is a reason to follow the feedback. If the industry is praised for helping animals at the end of the pipeline while its role in enlarging and defining the pipeline escapes examination, charity can become reputational insulation.

9. The American contribution

The United States combined five forms of scale:

- suburban scale—the physical multiplication of pet-owning households;
- retail scale—the national availability of standardised products;
- media scale—the repeated emotional message inside the home;
- professional scale—the use of scientific and veterinary authority;
- identity scale—the conversion of ownership into family membership and moral self-definition.

Together they made the system self-reproducing. Advertising did not need to command people to participate. It supplied pictures, words and rituals that people used to understand their own love.

10. A bounded but serious finding

The historical evidence supports the conclusion that American mass marketing deliberately investigated and used the emotional meanings of pets; that children and family households were commercially valuable audiences; that supermarkets and television made prepared feeding habitual; that veterinary channels carried product and health claims; and that the pet-as-family identity has deepened.

It is a reasonable inference that this environment weakened independent parental and consumer judgment. It is also reasonable to ask whether manufacturers and professional institutions avoided research designs capable of falsifying their preferred model.

The evidence presented here does not, on its own, establish a criminal agreement or prove that every participant knew of every alleged harm. Those questions require internal studies, board papers, correspondence, campaign research, adverse-event records and professional communications.

But one moral conclusion does not depend on proving a secret compact. When powerful organisations encourage a population to impose the same daily exposure on dependent animals, they assume a duty to investigate foreseeable suffering rigorously and openly. If trusted institutions instead help turn pain and chronic disease into ordinary expectations, the offence to public ethics is not simply that love was used to sell. It is that love was trained to overlook what it was doing.

11. The public record we need

The United States record should be examined for:

- historical market research on children, anthropomorphism, surrogate-child concepts and family identity;
- lifetime comparative feeding studies, including oral-health and quality-of-life outcomes;
- veterinary-school, association and clinic sponsorship agreements;
- the design, testing and legal review of disease-related advertising claims;
- data linking diet, chronic disease, veterinary expenditure, behaviour and relinquishment;
- the commercial objectives and measured sales effects of adoption and shelter campaigns.

America made the pet a mass market. The next task is to recover the evidence needed to decide whether the market's celebrated expressions of care concealed a predictable mass of animal suffering.

Provenance and sources

The quotations from Lonsdale’s two books establish earlier publication of the conditioning thesis. They should be read alongside, not instead of, independent historical and legal sources.

1. Tom Lonsdale, *Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health* (2023 text edition; first published 2001), p. 251.
2. Tom Lonsdale, *Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud: Hiding in Plain Sight* (2023), p. 6.
3. “Din-Din,” *The New Yorker*, 1 November 1976 — [Online source](#)
4. *Alpo Petfoods, Inc. v. Ralston Purina Co.*, 720 F. Supp. 194 (D.D.C. 1989) — [Online source](#)
5. Andrea Laurent-Simpson, *Just Like Family: How Companion Animals Joined the Household* (NYU Press, 2021) — [Online source](#)
6. Katja M. Guenther, “Coming to Terms with the Legacies of the Pound Model of Animal Sheltering,” *Animals* 14 (2024) — [Online source](#)
7. Jennifer R. Rodriguez et al., “Trends in Intake and Outcome Data From U.S. Animal Shelters From 2016 to 2020,” *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* 9 (2022) — [Online source](#)
8. Encarnación B. Perdomo et al., “Amelioration of Pet Overpopulation and Abandonment Using a Control of Supply and Demand Mechanism,” *Animals* 11 (2021) — [Online source](#)
9. Mars, “Pedigree Dog Adoptions” — [Online source](#)

Editorial note: This article analyses a cultural and commercial system. It does not assert that every commercial pet food causes disease, that every surrendered animal is a product of marketing, or that individual veterinarians, shelter workers or pet owners intend harm. Allegations of legal wrongdoing require evidence of the relevant act, knowledge, agreement and jurisdiction-specific offence.